

Lifeworld Foundation and the Scientific Image



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Abstract

Is a primacy of the lifeworld compatible with the scientific discovery of new (kinds of) objects?

I propose a framework for thinking about the phenomenological notions of “world” and “lifeworld”. Filling this out with a more specific notion of “existing physical thing”, I find two domains of science in Husserl: the “world of science”, founded on the lifeworld and criticized in the *Crisis*, and the “physical substratum” of the lifeworld, introduced in *Phenomenological Psychology*. The former is only instrumental; the latter allows for genuine scientific discovery.

- 1 Introduction: Manifest and Scientific Images
- 2 The General Posit “World” and the Concrete Lifeworld
- 3 Husserl’s Lifeworld and two Domains of Science
- 4 The Lifeworld and Scientific Realism

Eddington sits down at two tables,

- 1 One of them “familiar [...] from earliest years”, an object of “that environment which I call the world”
- 2 The other is “mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed.”
(Eddington 1928, ixf.)

Manifest and Scientific Images in Conflict

Sellars (1963) diagnosed a conceptual conflict between these **manifest** and **scientific** images.

Three reactions:

POS Only the scientific table is real. (Positivist)

INST Only the manifest table is real. (Instrumentalist)

REC The contradiction is only apparent. (Reconciliatory)

Husserl and other phenomenologists hold a version of

PRIM The lifeworld is prior to the world of natural science

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The General Posit

How is the general posit 'world' related to the lifeworld?

- the general posit (“Generalthesis”) is a *minimal* posit of a world: it is the mere posit that the order of experience is meaningful (instead of arbitrary, or chaotic)
- The general posit is shared between any pair of non-solipsistic subjects.
- The natural attitude contains more specific presuppositions: two subjects may or may not be said to “share a lifeworld”, however we fill out this notion later.

Concrete Lifeworlds

- terminology for my purposes:
 - 1 A *concrete lifeworld* is constituted in the actual life of a single subject
 - 2 A *shared lifeworld* is shared among a group of individuals
 - 3 The *eidetic lifeworld* is an essential structure of possible lifeworlds
- I will use the *concrete lifeworld* as the basic notion: this is the world of the natural attitude in which a specific life is situated. The other notions of lifeworld can be understood in its terms, although I will not talk about the eidetic lifeworld today.

Individuating Concrete Lifeworlds

How can we individuate concrete lifeworlds?

Some proposals:

- Historic periods
- Background beliefs (e.g. Beyer 2018, SEP) – suggests individuation via propositional contents
- Background cues (e.g. Compton 1988) – suggests individuation via habitualities

My proposal:

Concrete Lifeworld

A concrete lifeworld is what fulfils the anticipations of the general posit via additional anticipations from specific posits that are in effect or prepared to be effected.

What is relevant for discussing Eddington's tables are effected acts that posit physical things.

Positing Physical Things

After individuating concrete lifeworlds, how can we further explain the content of “acts of posit”? How are these acts individuated?

- Two questions about positing physical things (cf. ”the ‘what’ and its ‘it exists and actually is”” *Cartesian Meditations*, §43, Hua1):
 - 1 What is the objectual sense – distinguishing apples from pears (and poems)
 - 2 What is the existential sense – distinguishing apparent apples from real apples
- A generic proposal to group layers of sense in acts that posit physical things:
 - 1 Direct Passivity: anticipations about how an object affects me (the colour of the apple continues on the backside)
 - 2 Indirect Passivity: anticipations about how an object affects others (others react to the same apple)
 - 3 Typicality Horizons: normal environments, sizes, etc. (the apple is expected in a fruit bowl, not under a car)
 - 4 Affordances and Values: interpretations about possibilities for actions.
 - 5 Particular History: interpretation that the particular object has a causal history
 - 6 Symbolic Significance: e.g. the apple as the symbol of original sin in Christianity
- All layers combine into the objectual sense of a posited thing

Apparent Existence and Metaphysical Existence

What does apparent existence have to do with actual existence?

- A tenet of phenomenological philosophy: being has to be explained in terms of possible givenness
- Even if cancellation (“Durchstreichung”) is always a logical possibility, we already know what it means for a perceptible thing to exist: that no such cancellation occurs. No need for inaccessible things-in-themselves.

This suggests a move from “apparent existence” to “existence” by two steps:

- 1 From actual to all possible courses of experience in benign conditions
(Courses of experience in benign conditions are those that contain no later cancellation of a constituted object.)
- 2 From a community of actual subjects to a community of all possible subjects in communication and relations of empathy (cf. *Ideas I*, §48, Hua3-1)

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Passivity and the existential sense of a physical thing

This framework is general enough to articulate different interpretations of the lifeworld: some might e.g. claim a primacy of affordances over other layers of sense. I will focus on what I take to be a Husserlian version.

The passive givenness of sensation has afforded them a special place in Husserl's phenomenology. At least in his early work, even the intentionality of perception requires the apprehension of non-intentional sensation.¹

I do not have the space (today) to try and connect my next claim with Husserl's content-apprehension scheme in detail. But I think a simple consideration might be enough to justify it independently: Which frustrated anticipations cancel “this physical thing is *that* thing” and which frustrated anticipations cancel “this physical thing *is and exists*”?

- Only a disappointment of the passive layers (1.-2.) disappoints the **existential sense of a physical thing.**

¹cf. 5th logical investigation. I call this reading “conservative” because it is disputed whether Husserl later abandoned this view and the “content-apprehension scheme” as the general theory of constitution altogether, or only in the context of time-consciousness.

Shared Lifeworlds

- The dispensability of some layers of sense for the existence of a physical thing allows to understand how the same object can appear in different lifeworlds
- Communities of different sizes can share lifeworlds.
- Shared lifeworlds can be understood in terms of “stripping off” layers of sense in the object-positings that individuated them previously
- With more layers of sense stripped off, the posited objects can be shared between larger groups
- Example: A dog and I can look at the same £5 note.
- But our shared lifeworld does not contain financial value
- The notion of a shared lifeworld allows for a natural transition to Husserl's “physical substratum” of the lifeworld

The Physical Substratum of the Lifeworld

- In the 1925 lecture course *Phenomenological Psychology*, the domain of science is opened up by a twofold **abstraction** from the lifeworld².
- “[...] we recognize that the concrete experiential world admits of a purifying reduction by means of which we attain a closed realm of pure reality as an all-inclusive structure which pervades the experiential world everywhere. [...] This material world is manifestly prior in itself to the world of culture. Culture presupposes men and animals, as these in turn presuppose matter. [...] We can manifestly go one step further back abstractively. For, if we abstract from the psychic characteristics of the animal realities, thus, if the originally mental is also disregarded, then only pure matter is left everywhere, as that which is absolutely mindless.”

²Husserl [1925] 1968, esp. §17 (Hua 9)

The Physical Substratum of the Lifeworld

- The stripped off layers of sense are
 - 1 culturally relative
 - 2 psychologically relative
- On my reading, this is equivalent to considering physical things in a lifeworld that can be shared between all possible subjects

Combined with the primacy of passive layers for the existential sense of physical things, I try to summarize:

Physical Existence as Ideal Fulfilment

That a physical thing x exists, means so much and no more than that in the possible courses of perceptual experience in benign conditions, it would be evident to the members of a communicating intersubjectivity (of existing and possible egos) that some of us can be bodily affected by x .

The Idealized World of Science

- Contrast the physical substratum with the world of science that Husserl discusses in the *Crisis*
- Idealization instead of abstraction: determinable physical things are interpreted as symbols for determinate ideal entities
- This apprehension constructs idealized entities with actively constituted, mathematically determinate layers of sense
- But idealized entities cannot be sensorily present – they have no passive layers of sense

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"Reality" as whatever applies to observable physical things

- Whether or not the transcendental reduction undermines the mind-transcendence of everyday objects: it should remain legitimate to speak of observable everyday physical things as real objects; the phenomenological clarification can only reveal what we mean by “real” and maybe, whether we have read too much into it.
- The manifest table certainly has to count as real for the purpose of the present discussion
- The question was whether the relevant notion of reality can make sense of imperceptible (kinds of) objects that are introduced in scientific theories

Instrumentalism and the Idealized World of Science

On the account developed here, a scientific table as described in the *Crisis* cannot exist in the same sense as a manifest table:

- 1 The existential sense of physical things in the lifeworld is determined by synthesized passive layers of sense
- 2 Scientific idealization is an interpreting apprehension, not a form of synthesis.
- 3 Entities introduced in scientific theories have no passive layers of sense (implication of 2.)
- 4 From 1. and 3.: Idealized objects of the scientific world cannot have the same existential sense as physical objects in the lifeworld
- 5 4. rules out (REC)
- 6 A denial of (POS) then leads to (INSTR) about the idealized world of science

A similar argument could be made in terms of the incompatibility of determinable physical things (e.g. constructed from material essences, like redness, which always keep an open horizon) and determinate mathematical objects (e.g. constructed from formal essences)

Unobservable Entities: Four Strategies

In the light of this result, there are four different kinds of response:

- 1 Bite the bullet: scientific anti-realism cf. Wiltsche 2012
- 2 Givenness through eidetic intuition
- 3 Givenness through founded/aided/indirect perception with appresentation
- 4 Givenness to non-actual, but possible egos

I argued that Husserl prepares a version of (4.) in *Phenomenological Psychology*. Let me contrast this to the other ways one might try to achieve a form of (REC)

Categorial Intuition

Categorial intuition is what Husserl introduces to explain what fulfils acts that are directed at states of affairs of abstract mathematical objects.

The problems with categorial intuition for scientific discovery: it gives access to the wrong kind of objects. Categorically intuited objects are

- Abstract
- Not spatio-temporally individuated
- Given through active, not passive syntheses

Founded Perception with Appresentation

When discussing the givenness of other subjects, Husserl runs into a problem that shares some similarities with that of imperceptible particles³. One could think that in e.g. in manipulating an electron beam, unobservable entities are “appresented” like other egos when understanding a facial expression.

Problems with expanding this to account for imperceptible entities:

- Appresented contents seem to be such that they could be adequately given but in a concrete case are not (because I am not the person feeling the pain)
- Physical things are *necessarily* incapable of adequate givenness. There is always another backside waiting to be revealed. Where are the open horizons of further determination in appresentations?
- What is passively given is always the tool, or the screen, or the medium; not the imperceptible object

³Cf. Vth Cartesian Meditation, p.139 (Hua1)

The Ideal Community of Possible Egos

- A different approach is based on the reference to possible beings which “see better and further” (*Ideas I*, §52) – or maybe just differently
- Such beings could constitute a sensible meaning for (humanly) “imperceptible” objects

Is this too generic?

- One might worry that reference to merely possible subjects is too permissive; and possibly allows to introduce unintelligible things-in-themselves through the backdoor of possible divine beings
- I think this worry can be addressed by requiring that the possibility of such beings can not be just a logical possibility, but must be motivated by actual experience

Familiar experiences with Superior Egos

- When empathising with animals, such different egos are not so unfamiliar.
Off-the-cuff examples:
 - Consider blowing a Dog Whistle
 - Bats' echolocation
 - Navigation of migrating birds
 - Even if one has never lost a sensory capacity, there is nothing unusual about encountering *actual* beings with other sensory capacities

Experiments motivate the possibility of superior egos

- Successful manipulation in experiments motivates the assumption of further *possible* beings with other sensory capacities
- The simpler the manipulation, the more direct the feedback and in turn the more evident is the possibility of such a being
- This can be made salient by e.g. imagining new sensory organs that replace the laboratory equipment; or that the tools join one's body to form a cyborg
- Imagine the quasi-tactile experience of touching a transparent ball that can only be touched with protective gloves. The possibility of a being which does not need gloves is evident.
- The possible-ego strategy generalizes this idea to more complex cases. In manipulating charges with an electron beam, it is (to a lesser degree) evident to the experimenting scientist that she or he is producing real changes, subject to their will. And like the apparatuses, there could be a being that is directly affected by the imperceptible electron beam.

The Idealized World of Science Remains Idealized

- Physical things for superior egos are still connected to possible sensory experience and thus have open horizons of further determinations
- The categorial distinction between determinable physical things of the lifeworld and idealized physical things remains intact
- But through motivating assumptions about superior egos, science can lead to genuine metaphysical discovery
- This qualifies this approach as a form of reconciliation (REC) in response to Sellars' puzzle.
- The motivation of *possible* experience in *actual* experience means that even the “physical substratum” cannot be made sense of without the *actual* world of lived experience. The primacy of the lifeworld (PRIM) remains a primacy of the actual concrete lifeworld, not merely possible lifeworlds.

Thank you for your attention

Slides are available at gregorboes.com/dl

Any comments are highly appreciated, also any time via

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